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GENEVA FOR RMA
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TAGS: [PREF PHUM SMIG TH LA](#)
SUBJECT: THAI ARMY: REMAINING LAO HMONG TO BE DEPORTED FROM
PETCHABUN IN EARLY NOVEMBER

REF: BANGKOK 2712

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires, a.i., James F. Entwistle for Reason
s 1.5 (b, d)

11. (C) Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) General Nipat Thonglek, head of the Thai delegation to the bilateral Thai-Lao committee handling the Lao Hmong in Petchabun, unexpectedly told Charge on October 26th that all remaining 4,221 Lao Hmong in the facility would be deported to Laos in early November. The deportation will include Lao Hmong identified in a January 2008 Royal Thai government (RTG) vetting process as "screened in" and previously privately described by RTG officials as not subject to return. Nipat said an operational plan has been developed that "foresees using force" if necessary. According to Nipat, the decision to resort to a large-scale forcible deportation was made by the National Security Council (NSC) last week, and awaits a green-light from the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, expected "in the next few days." Gen. Nipat requested U.S. support for this "last stage" of the Lao Hmong return operation, which has seen 2,800 returned in small groups over the last 18 months.

12. (C) According to Gen. Nipat, RTARF Chief of Defense Forces Songkitti Jaggabatar and the NSC Secretary General noted the recent destruction (by French officials) of a illegal migrant settlement in Calais, France, and became "very confident" that the forcible return of the remaining Lao Hmong was defensible. The early November timing of the deportation was requested by Lao army Brigadier General Bouaxieng Champaphanh, Nipat's counterpart, to avoid conflicting with the Southeast Asia Games, to be hosted by Laos in late November. Nipat claimed that the remaining Lao Hmong in Petchabun "refuse to return" and that therefore the "rule of law" will be used to solve the long-standing problem. The RTARF's operational plan envisions returning all the Petchabun Hmong within a 12-hour period. Initially, about 50 key Hmong leaders--of whom 30 were characterized as particularly important-- will be apprehended and forced on buses. The RTARF expects that others in the camp will then acquiesce and return without force. Government of Laos (GOL) officials will be invited to observe the large-scale deportation.

13. (C) In response to Charge's request, the RTARF agreed to provide a list of the "screened in" Hmong to assist in possible third country resettlement after their return to Laos. Gen. Nipat claimed that Lao BG Bouaxieng had agreed recently to allow the group to be resettled abroad after a 30-day "processing period" in Laos. The RTARF delegation suggested that the U.S. quickly accept the group, and appeared surprised when the various refugee processing steps were described (again.) Nipat and his staff were unable to provide details regarding arrangements in Laos to identify,

segregate and provide access for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to the "screened in" Hmong. RefCoord noted the practical obstacles in identifying and locating them once they had dispersed to their home villages, and suggested that OPE pre-screening (to include collecting biodata and contact information) prior to departure from Thailand would be the minimum required to pursue later processing in Laos. Gen. Nipat asserted that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had been approached by the RTG to "witness" the large-scale forcible return, and that IOM was considering participation. (Note: we believe that IOM is only considering assisting the current repatriation process in an attempt to improve transparency and voluntariness, and would not be willing to be involved in a clearly forced deportation. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Comments.

We have heard RTG announcements concerning the closing of the Petchabun camp several times in the past, and deadlines have passed without action. This occasion was different: a solemn RTARF delegation visited the Embassy to inform us directly, and to gauge our reaction. Still, it may be that a clearly uncomfortable Gen. Nipat previewed the mass deportation for us so that we could weigh-in with the Prime Minister's office in opposition. That would allow the RTARF to avoid a difficult, messy operation for which they (and particularly Gen. Nipat) are certain to receive international criticism. Nipat could then inform his Lao military counterpart that the RTARF attempted to meet the December 30th closure date for Petchabun, but were prevented from doing so by the PM under

BANGKOK 00002724 002 OF 002

international pressure. In support of this theory, Gen. Nipat did not appear discomfited when we reminded him of PM Abhisit's July commitment to the Secretary that there would not be forcible returns of the Petchabun group, and he quickly inquired if the issue might be raised by POTUS in Singapore next month. (We told him it very well might.) We also note that the operation outlined by Nipat borders on the impossible (4,000 Hmong loaded on buses and removed in twelve hours, particularly if there is resistance) and wonder if Nipat was laying out as dire a scenario as possible in the hopes that we might object strongly.

¶5. (C) We will "ground truth" Gen. Nipat's odd account with the MFA and IOM over the next few day and formulate action recommendations to perhaps include reminding PM Abhisit of his "no forced returns" promise to Secretary Clinton, and raising the matter with General Songkitti when he is in Washington at the end of this week. It would also be very helpful to have Embassy Vientiane's read on all this.
ENTWISTLE